

\$1 'star notes' not rare, only worth a buck

By Roger Boye

This week's column answers more questions about coins and currency.

Q—The government really goofed when it made the \$1 bill I got in change last week. A small star follows the eight-digit serial number, rather than a letter as on normal bills. How much is my rarity worth?—D.J., River Grove

A—Just \$1. Every month, federal workers replace thousands of bills that became spoiled during the printing process with consecutively numbered "star notes" similar to your specimen.

Q—Our parents gave us more than two dozen Indian-head pennies. We've checked them all carefully but can't find mint marks on any of the coins. Where should we look? Also, what are the three or four rarest dates and how much are they worth?—D.F., Chicago

A—Uncle Sam produced most Indian-head pennies in Philadelphia, the one mint that did not put an identifying mark on its coins. Two exceptions are some of the 1908 and 1909 specimens made in San Francisco; check the tails side under the wreath for a small "S."

The kingpin of the series is the 1877, which retails for \$200 or more in "good condition." The 1909-S goes for \$100 in "good" while the 1869, 1871 and 1872 all fetch \$30 or more in "good."

Q—With the price of gold dropping on world markets, is the value of my old U.S. \$5 and \$10 gold pieces also disintegrating?—D.I., Chicago

A—Not necessarily. U.S. gold coins minted before 1933 have value as collectors' items, unlike modern-day South African Krugerrands and other "bullion coins" traded strictly for their gold content. Although a declining gold market depresses the prices of most collectible gold pieces, they tend to retain their values better than bullion items.

Q—My 1972 proof set includes an inverted dime; that is, the tails side of the coin is on the same side of the proof set as the heads sides of the other pieces, and vice versa. As far as I know, this is the only such set in existence. Could it have significant value?—H.C., Lake Villa

A—Probably not. Government staffers place proof coins into the packages by hand. Although errors such as yours are unusual, few dealers would pay special premiums for the "funny sets."

Q—How can we know for sure if any of our foreign coins contain silver?—D.F., Streamwood

A—Most pieces are easy to distinguish by their color, although even the experts can mistake coins made with certain nickel alloys for silver. On the close calls, check a comprehensive foreign-coin book such as the "Standard Catalogue of World Coins" by Chester L. Krause and Clifford Mishler.